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STARTING POINT IN T

AN INTRODUCTORY PAPER
AND RESPECTFUL

ADDRESSED TO
THOUGHTFUL NATIVE ST
IN THEOLOGY

IN
CHINA AND JAPAN

BY
REV. WILLIAM ASHMORE



PRINTED
BY
FUKUIN PRINTING CO., LTD

1902.



THE STARTING POINT IN THEOLOGY.

AN INTRODUCTORY PAPER, REVISED, AND RESPECTFULLY ADDRESSED TO THOUGHTFUL NATIVE STUDENTS IN THEOLOGY IN CHINA AND JAPAN.

BY REV. WILLIAM ASHMORE, D.D.

The starting point of inquiry in all theology and all philosophy is one and the same. We properly start in both cases from a consideration of the *Ego* and *Non-Ego*. "The self" and "the not self."

I start from the standpoint of my personal self and from what I see in the visible universe around me. The reach of my thought is upward, and outward, and downward—what is above me; what is around me; and what is below me; what is behind me; and what is before me. From the visible I am forced to reason to the invisible; from the known to the unknown; from the tangible to the intangible; from that which is, to that which has been, and that which may be; from effects to causes and from causes to effects. I am forced thus to reason; it is a tendency of my nature; it is a law of my being; that is, if I think at all, it must be along the lines indicated. I observe, and then I reason, and then I form conclusions. As indicated above my thoughts all group themselves in two classes—those which pertain to things outside of myself, and those which pertain to my personal human self and my neighbors who are like me.

THE VISIBLE CREATION.

Above me, around me, under me, is a universe of matter. These are the heavens, the sun and the moon and the stars. Their existence and their purpose are to be accounted for. The infinity of them all impress me—their number, their magnitude, their distance, their movements, the tremendous force that dominates them. The more I look the more I wonder. When it comes to the earth on which I live and move and have my being I am impressed still more deeply, because my

now take in a greater number of minutiae. Here are millions of organizations of matter and life that fill the air, the sea and the land. Then marvellous interorganizations run through them again. They are strongly linked and interlinked; they cross and recross lines of demarkation; they fade out of themselves and reappear in something else; they come and they go; they increase and they diminish; they are in a perpetual quiver with the phenomena of incessantly acting and incomprehensible law. Then there are elemental substances out of which the air, the land and the water are made—solid substances, liquids and gases. These disintegrate and combine; they attract and repel; the energy with which they sometimes do these things is positively fearful in the manifestation; and the velocity of movement, as in electricity for example, is astounding and but for the verification of demonstration would be declared unthinkable. And then here is the light of day and the darkness of the night; and here is heat and here is cold; and here is drought and here is moisture; and here is the continuous round of the seasons, coming and going forever, seed time and harvest, subject always to the same general laws, and yet always marked by variations which stamp each season with an individuality of its own. And then here are countless phenomena of all kinds all around me always happening and yet even now perpetually arresting my attention.

MY PERSONAL SELF.

Even more perplexing and wonderful in some respects are the things which strike me when I come to the contemplation of my personal self. I am a part of that visible creation which has already profoundly moved me. Obviously I belong in the very highest grade. I can see plainly that I consist of a body and a soul. In my body of flesh and bones I am kindred to the beasts that perish. Yet in purely natural traits these very beasts are, many of them, in single particulars, far ahead of me. They can see further away than I can; can see into the nature of things by their natural senses as I cannot; they can see in the dark as I cannot; they have a power of endurance, a swiftness of motion, and a might of strength which I would give all I have to possess. But then I have an intellect of such vast and varied capacity that my reason is better than all their instincts. I am placed immeasurably above the whole of them, and am easily their lord and master. I am fitted for a more lofty position than I now hold. At some time or other my ancestors must have stood higher than I do now. To be sure I am

advancing, but all around me, and in me, are the evidences of a lapse at some time or other in the indefinite past. The strangest of all things about me—the most painful and inexplicable—is my consciousness of sin. I have sin and am a sinner. There is a double nature within me; there is a lordly power which accuses me when I do some things and commends me when I do others; the rewarding and the lashing power of this inner monitor are both of them exquisite. Why I should be so manifestly designed for a state of blessedness and yet be so enthralled with a curse and be so continuously the victim of baffled expectations and blasted hopes is beyond my comprehension.

Nor am I alone in these things. I am only one of myriads in the same condition. In our aggregate totality we are moved and swayed by all sorts of social and intellectual movements that are race wide in their dimensions. We have our own aims and our own plans and our own methods, yet it is apparent that there are other aims, and other plans, and other methods of colossal sweep, over which we have no control. We are perfectly free, so far as we can see; and yet, with all our independence, we are all being borne along constituents of that supreme plan as the separate planks and timbers that form a drift are borne along on the flood of a swollen river.

INQUIRIES NOW FORCED UPON ME.

They all concern the universe that I see; they concern our common humanity; they concern myself personally and they concern me intensely; they are speculative and they are practical; they spring from the head and they spring from the heart. Though inclusive of many variations they are all reducible to four:—

WHENCE?

How?

WHY?

WHITHER?

WHENCE came all these things as I see them—this sun, moon and stars, and dry land standing out of the water and in the water and all that in and on them is? How is this universe put together? How are the parts framed and dove-tailed into each other? By what force are they made to cohere and to consist and to keep on their perpetual way? WHY and for what purpose do they exist as they are? What are the immediate, what the remote, and what are the final ends to be

subserved by continuance? *Whither* do they all tend, what is to be the final outcome of this complicated and unlimited mechanism? More than all that is outward, *Whence* came I myself? *How* do I exist? *Why* am I—what I am? *Whither* do I go? And what is to become of me at the last? Will I die like a brute or will I live forever? Will I ever be rid of sin and suffering? Will I ever achieve a complete moral mastery of self? And will I ever attain to supreme and everlasting blessedness? If so *Where?* *When?* and *How?*

According as I devote myself to the elucidation of these inquiries, will I find myself in the domain of the theologian, the philosopher and the scientist respectively, more or less. If I limit myself and profess to disclaim all regard for archæological or teleological origins and ends and am to be taken up merely with the mechanical and the chemical *How* of all things, and to decline to make it much of a personal matter, then do I largely limit myself to the sphere of the scientist. If I start out with some sort of a set purpose against the supernatural, a disinclination to trace things up to a possible personality, and avow a purpose to confine myself to the mere linking together of physical causations alone, I have joined the ranks of atheistical scientists. But if I am willing to recognise the existence of some infinite energy, somewhere or other, of a personal nature, and of some dominant and universal will-power, then I am to be enrolled among theistical scientists. If, after having collated a vast number of facts, I set out to account for them and to combine them into a coherent system, reducing many plans to one plan, many forces to one force, and many laws to one law, or to one law and a few cognates, then am I in the domain of the philosopher. Here again, if in my search for a rational explanation I make up my mind before I start that I will steer clear of the necessity of recognizing a personal origin, and if I manage to keep clear of it by declaring it impossible to find out so remote and recondite a causation, then I am to be classed with atheistic, or agnostic philosophers, as the case may be. But if I am willing to accept the deductions of logic and the evidences of intelligent purpose wherever I find them, and to follow them to where they may lead me, even if it be to the foot-stool of a personal God, then I am to be reckoned among devout and theistic philosophers. Yet so long as I leave out these personal considerations concerning sin and deliverance, and my personal relation to what may be superior and invisible intelligences around me, so long as I do this, I am a philosopher only. When I make the whole subject supremely personal; when I subordinate all inquiries into the mere *whence*, *how*, and *whither* of the material

universe ; and when I make dominant over all an inquiry into the ethics of existence, into the character of such superior beings as I am constrained to postulate, and of my relation to them, into the facts of my sinful nature, accompanied with a heart-rending desire to get rid of them, then am I in the domain of theology.

The latter is the field we are now proposing to enter. For the purpose of the present research we shall have but little occasion to touch upon purely philosophical grounds, and still less to deal with purely scientific issues, though, as we advance more deeply into the subject, we shall find ourselves supported by a more scientific view of science and a more profoundly philosophical view of philosophy than the non-theistic among themselves have yet been able to present.

CONDITIONS OF THE PROBLEM.

Relegating minor questions and subordinate issues to the back ground, and applying ourselves to theological and anthropological lines we may summarise our needs as follows:—

We need to know something about some adequate cause for what we see around us. Our observations lead us to conclude that that cause must be a unit, and all comprehensive; that it must involve a personality; and that personality must be living; must be omniscient; must be omnipresent; must be omnipotent; must be omniparient; and must be omniprevalent. The existence of such a being is demanded by all the elements of knowledge.

Lectus look into these affirmations, right as this point, and before we sammarise our other needs. To anticipate a little; it is said that that which “may be known—is known”; the unknown can, to a certain extent, be learned from the known. I once sat down to test this matter in a practical manner with a good Chinese reasoner and scholar. My point was to ascertain what can be learned from the light of nature about a supreme first cause. The lines of inquiry were indicated by the following questions.

I. As you look out on the things of the world around,—the things that are made,—the order of occurrence,—the changes of seasons—and other things,—Is it all mere hodge-podge and uncertainty; or is there order, and method, and system, and indication of adaptations of means to ends such as characterise intelligence and purpose.

II. Can you conceive of intelligence and intelligent purpose—
inherent in senseless objects which can neither see nor hear—nor think

--nor change, nor modify, or, must the intelligence you see imply a personality of some kind or other ?

III. From all that you can see and learn, and from all that science teaches would you infer that there are several different systems of law, (of gravitation, or of motion, or of light, for example) thus employing several different administrations, and several different administrators ; or would you conclude that there is but *one* system of laws with but *one* administration and one administrator, and but *one* dominant purpose apparent in the universe ?

IV. Would you conclude that this great world as you see it is fully run by itself without the slightest variation of any kind, at any time, in any place ; or, are then so many variations that they involve the necessity of being looked after, by some one capable of it ? Thus, for example, though a shower of rain, needful for the growth of a crop, is a resultant of certain established laws—yet there is an immense diversity in the times and modes of action of those laws. A typhoon which may be very destructive of life and property is also a product of fixed laws. Yet who knows when it is going to rain, and how much it will rain ? Who knows where there is going to be a typhoon, how violent it will be, and which course it will take. And so with the working of a hundred other “fixed laws.” Is it necessary that there should be some intelligent and capable supervision of them all ?

V. How much Power must be possessed by the administrative intelligence which directs so many and such tremendous forces as are called into action, or retired from action, or reversed in operation, in such an amazingly complex machine as this world, and still more this almost infinite Kosmos, must be ?

VI. How much wisdom must he be called upon to exercise in this same administrative work, to see that every thing takes place in due order, that there be no collision, nor wreckages, nor disturbance of equilibrium, that would lead to confusion and to ruinous disaster ? The question is not as to whether he may not have to exercise some wisdom but is any very great wisdom essential ?

VII. There arises another question. If human affairs require supervision, it might happen that while attention is needed in one place, some other place as far distant as America is from China might demand attention at the same moment of time. How could this living and intelligent Personality act efficiently in both places at the same moment ?

We were several hours, on several different days working over these problems. We took plenty of time to think, and reasoned to and fro

cautiously and carefully. The results were that this Chinese thinker reasoned out for himself as the first and the greatest of all our human needs, exactly the things stated above, about a first cause, about a personality, about omnipotence, about omnipresence and about omniscience. Or to borrow in advance of its proper place, the sublime, the profoundly philosophical and thoroughly scientific designation of the Apostle. "*Eternal Power and Godhead*," though as yet nothing conclusive beyond that, without some other and higher sources of enlightenment.

And now we continue the enumeration of our *needs*.

We need to have a rational explanation, at least in a general way, of the coming into existence of this present-cosmos and of the manner in which it is sustained; of the secret of its administration in a way which will satisfy us that order and not confusion, improvement and not destruction, will be the final outcome.

We need to have some clearly defined conception of our relation to the spiritual being whom we have already been forced to conclude must be in existence and is affecting us for weal or for woe.

We need some satisfactory way of accounting for the existence of moral evil, and we need some assured hope of deliverance from it. We are appalled at this persistence of disease and death and at the spread of the perpetual curse. We want to be rid of the sin and the disorder which cause them all. We want hope, hope that will lift us out of this put of despair.

We need a reinforcement of moral power, some infusion or transfusion of moral energy that will help us to do right and triumph over the debasement which continually works us into the quick-sand. We want to be able to reach lofty ideals and not be grovelling and falling back for ever.

In a word, *we need life*—the highest form of life—a life that shall satisfy our natures and fill all our mental, moral and spiritual receptivities as our present environment does not fill them now; and we need life more abundantly, some development or impartation of life that shall allow full scope to these god-like capabilities that we find to be in us.

WHERE SHALL WE GET LIGHT?

We are willing to take pilgrimages to every shrine of knowledge, to every cave of the recluse heathen sage, to every academic hall of the philosopher and to every laboratory of the scientist to see what

answers they will give to the great questions of the Whence, the How, the Wherefore, and the Whither of our human selves as related to this universe around us. We will give them all a fair and candid hearing first. We will hear their hypotheses and sift their arguments. If they can answer all our questions satisfactorily, they shall have the credit of it. If not, they must be ruled aside. We will then come to that book called the Bible, and we will ask, What has it to offer in reply to our inquiries, that commends itself to our acceptance?

WHAT ANSWERS DOES HAETHENISM GIVE?

There are many and varied forms of heathenism. The oldest of them deal a little with the great inquiry of the Whence of all things, But there is no unity among them. There is a faint recognition of the doctrine of a Supreme Being, but it is obviously a remnant of something lost. We discover that this elemental and single personality soon becomes differentiated into several. At the bottom of them all lies the ancient Sabianism, or the worship of the Host of Heaven. The sun, moon and stars become strangely mixed up, appearing at one time as separate powers, and at another as varied manifestations of the same power. In the Vedic hymns, Indra, the god of light, and Agni, the god of fire, are strangely mixed up in the same ascriptions. Then, presently, supremacy appears ascribed to Varuna, the god of water. According to some, matter is eternal; according to others, matter is only transformed deity. Then, the world rests on the back of a tortoise, and underneath there is a sea, of milk. Such a cosmogony is sheer absurdity. When we come to the absorbing topic of sin and suffering and deliverance from them, we find nothing which we can accept. Hope there is none, moral recuperative energy there is none. Certainty of deliverance there is none. To none of these questions does any form of heathenism, ancient or modern, offer the semblance of rational answer. It is a long stage between the knife-gashing of the ancient Baal cult and the hook-swinging of modern India, but they are children of the same stock; the one is the descendant of the other. The family likeness of Moloch is on them all.

WHAT ANSWERS DOES BUDDHISM GIVE?

This too is a heathenism, but its pretensions, the vast number of its adherents, and the buttressing it is receiving from a certain class of

minds in the West, demands that in a class of intelligent students it should have special consideration. The replies that it offers to the questions of the Whence, How, Wherefore, and Whither are as unsatisfactory as are those of its mother heathenism before it. Its doctrine of God—or rather of No-God—its doctrine of man, its doctrine of sin, its doctrine of expiation, or what it makes the substitute of expiation, its doctrine of eschatology, none of them meet the conditions of the situation. They recognise the existence of sin and suffering and the need of recuperation, but what ashes of Sodom they serve up to those who seek the bread of life. No such thing as veritable expiation, but an endless and appalling round of transmigration, and then, when the interminable ages have passed, an absorption, into insensible and eternal nothingness as the best possible outcome. And this is put forward as a theory of the universe of matter and of mind. That such a final haven of unconsciousness and oblivion should have offered itself to the kind-hearted recluse, oppressed with the problem of human suffering and seeing no possible way of relief but in sullen self-extinction, and whose mind was worked till it bent and broke, is not strange. But we know too much already ever to fall in with the sentiment that what he achieved was “Enlightenment.” Still less can we suppose that such an intelligent author of the universe as we are forced to conceive of, could ever have been the author of such stuff as that about man, his guilt and his deliverance.

WHAT ANSWERS DOES CONFUCIANISM GIVE?

The system of the sage does indeed bear witness to the direness of human needs, but it answers not one of the great questions in hand. Its meagre and unsatisfactory teachings are there, and speak for themselves. Confucius deals with me as a member of the family and subject of the state, and with that it leaves me in blank negative. I know not whence I came; I know not whither I go. When conscious of my awful moral infirmity, and seeking some additional power to my enervated and relaxed moral nature, I am shut up to myself and to my now feeble resources and told to do the best I can to lift myself out of the ditch. If I fail, then what? Nothing! Hope again there is none. Light on the things of the invisible world there is none. Life everlasting and ever-blessed there is none. Again I am stranded in despair.

WHAT ANSWERS DO PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE GIVE?

In some directions their researches are invaluable. But they both are taken up with the How, and but little with the original Whence and the ultimate Whither. Into questions of mechanism, of social adaptations, and of cosmical combinations they do enter largely. It is not, however, characteristic of them to deal with the logical clues to such a thing as a divine personality. A few, indeed, reverently approach the conception; but too many of them advance so far that we say the next logical step will lead to the discovery, when, all at once, they suddenly draw back as with a shivering dread of a personal God. But in theological inquiry a supreme object of solicitude is sin and the deliverance from sin. Next, after some well-defined knowledge of a Creator, comes some well-defined hope for the creature. This enters into the essence of religion along with the other. But when it comes to this, both philosophy and science, as now generally taught, present a colorless blank. They do not deal with sin. Sin is a tabooed subject with them. The redemption of the soul enters not into their studies. They take cognisance of the things of time and not the things of eternity. We are not criticizing them for so doing. Made up as the body of them are, they are not fitted to do otherwise. It is the fact that we emphasize. The point is that we are again stranded high and dry—our miserable sin-laden souls without a ray of light or a germ of hope. So far as our own souls are concerned, past, present, and future, neither philosophy nor science offers a solution of the Whence, the How, the Wherefore, and the Whither of anything. There is much that is instructive, but nothing that is conclusive.

WHAT ANSWERS DO THE SCRIPTURE GIVE?

We turn away then from Vedic hymns, from Shasters and Upanishads and Cateneæ, and Analects, for one and the same reason that, while they contain much that is good, yet, for the purposes of our present inquiry, they present not the order and fruitfulness of a well-cultivated garden but the wildness and barrenness of a dreary desert with nothing but its crop of sage bushes to tantalise the anxious eye and intensify the gnawing hunger.

We turn to the book called the Bible. The earlier parts of it are ancient, more ancient than any of the hymns of the Vedas and than any

of the Chinese Classics. It does reply to these great questions one and all. With scientific details and philosophical formulas it is not concerned. They enter not into its supreme and majestic purpose. These men of wisdom to "search out and set in order" for themselves, but in all that relates to an all-sufficient primal cause, to intelligent ends and purposes in creation, to an accounting for the origin of sin, to a way of escape from it all, to a hope of final restitution and eternal redemption, it is as full and explicit as any reasonable being can ask for.

Its first opening sentence is a blaze of sunlight, "*In the beginning God.*" From that on the whole pathway of the race is lit up at every stage. The book tells us about just such a Being as we have been forced to postulate, just such a self-contained and all-sufficient Being, himself the only self-existent, as we have been inquiring about, the life-giving and the all mighty, whose "kingdom ruleth over all." It tells us that by the word of this all mighty Being the worlds were framed so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear. It accounts for the origin of sin. There were angelic beings of lofty dignity and amazing power. They were created pure and holy; they were overcome with a sense of their own greatness; they toppled over into self-confidence and fell. When they new race was created, the leader of this fallen host succeeded in inoculating it with his own diabolism, and the reign of sin on earth began. But from it all a ransom has been found and a deliverer to be testified in due time. In the end righteousness will triumph, moral energy will be imparted from a new life-giving source, sin will come to a finish, there shall be no more death and there will be new heavens and a new earth. This strangely compounded book called the Bible, starts out with man in the garden of God; then a sinner; then an outcast; then a wanderer down into and over across an awful valley of the shadow of death; then upward again, until finally the regenerated part of the race is anew introduced into the garden, where flows forever the river of the water of life, and on the banks of which grow the tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

All this is something tangible. So far as our own personal requirements are concerned it does furnish answers to the questions, Whence, How, Wherefore, and Whither; and incidentally it does throw incontrovertible light on these same questions as applied to the universe at large. It is the only positive answer that has ever been, given. "*For of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things.*"

Having thus come to this book, we now propose to enter upon the

study and know
a
mine it through and through ; to begin at the beginning
development as one would follow the course of a river
gushing spring in the distant mountains down to the coast where
its gathered flood of waters debouch into the illimitable ocean ; we shall
study its doctrine of God, its doctrine of angels, its doctrine of man, its
doctrine of sin, its doctrine of redemption, and its doctrine of rehabilita-
tion and of " all things new." This is the starting point of our Theology ;
and these are the lines along which the structure is to be built. If, in it,
we find a complete and consistent unity of plan worthy of the greatness
of the demand, and of the High and Lofty One who is said to inhabit
eternity, and, if we find that it meets the needs of the human intellect,
the human conscience and the human heart, we shall accept it as the
verifying test of ultimate and eternal truth.



